

Frontier and Periphery in Late Antique Palestine

Doron Bar

THE DEFINITION of “frontier” in Roman studies usually means border, a distinct area on the map which symbolizes the edge of the Roman Empire’s territory and sovereignty, a region where Romans, by war, trade, or exile, encountered other cultures. Most Roman frontier studies in the past have attempted to unravel the geographical complexity of the frontier system.¹ Such investigations, however, pay insufficient attention to other, no less significant types of “frontiers,” interior and exterior, crucial to our understanding of Late Antiquity.²

In this article I will try to define the place and importance of the “frontier” in the settlement history of Late Antique Palestine. “Frontier” will be defined here as a remote and sparsely settled area, untouched territory and a place for pioneers.³ The

¹The bibliography on this subject is of course enormous. See for example E. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore 1976); *Roman Frontier Studies, 15th International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies* (Exeter 1989); D. Kennedy and D. Riley, *Rome’s Desert Frontier from the Air* (London 1990); B. Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East*² (Oxford 1992); C. R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore 1994); H. Elton, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (London 1996); D. Cherry, *Frontier and Society in Roman North Africa* (Oxford 1998); G. Greatrex and S. N. C. Lieu, edd., *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars* (London/New York 2002).

²H. S. Sivan and R. W. Mathisen, *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (London 1996) 1–7.

³Perhaps we would do better to define the Roman frontiers in the same way that historians of the western United States have long described the American frontier, that is, as a cultural process with a geographical expression. See R. F. Berkhofer, Jr., “The North American Frontier as Process and Context,” in H.

frontier, as discussed here, does not necessarily mark the limits or boundaries of Palestine,⁴ but rather will be connected with a settlement shift to the vacant areas during Late Antiquity. Palestine's "frontier," so it is argued in this paper, had no decisive limits as it was shifting steadily, pushing forward in accordance with Palestine's inhabitants' readiness and daring to do so.

While until only few years ago historic and archaeological research focused mainly on the urban sector of Late Antique Palestine, recent excavations and surveys in the countryside have allowed a re-evaluation of the customary views about settlement patterns. The data accumulated from the rural areas of Palestine, where the majority of the population lived,⁵ will be used in this article as a demographic index as we examine changes in settlement patterns. The purpose of this paper is to transform the archaeological data collected over the last few decades into a spatial settlement picture. By focusing on the geographical dimension, we can try to answer the key question: Why did Palestine witness during Late Antiquity such an exceptional population growth and a climax of settlement, and what were the historical and sociological circumstances that led to the conquering of the secondary land during this period?

The geographical setting of Palestine

Palestine is situated between the Mediterranean to the west and an almost unbroken desert belt to the east and south. This

Lamar and L. Thompson, ed., *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared* (New Haven/London 1981) 43–75. S. L. Dyson, "The Roman Frontier in Comparative Perspective: The View from North America," in P. Brun *et al.*, ed., *Frontières d'Empire: Nature et signification des frontières romaines* (Nemours 1993) 149–157, extensively argues for the similarity between the American frontier and the Roman frontier zone.

⁴Y. Tsafir, "Boundaries and Geographical Limits," in Y. Tsafir, L. Di Segni, G. Green, *Tabula Imperii Romani: Iudaea Palaestina* (Jerusalem 1994) 9–19.

⁵M. Broshi, "The Population of Western Palestine," *BASOR* 236 (1979) 1–10.

stretch of land contains almost all the major relief elements characteristic of the adjacent regions: coastal plains, mountain ranges, small-scale plateaus, and several basins. Like many other parts of the Mediterranean, Palestine is characterized by harsh climatic and geographic conditions that restricted settlement and agriculture during most periods.⁶ Although the climate in some parts of the region is temperate, rainfall in most parts rarely exceeds 550 mm per year. Climatically, then, this is the “watershed” between arid and semi-arid zones, which makes water so precious. It is hard to find running rivers in the region, and the number of springs is also small. The agricultural potential of the land is likewise limited, with few plains and valleys that can comfortably be cultivated. Most parts of Palestine are mountainous while many others are desert. The land is generally covered with only a thin layer of good soil, and a substantial proportion of it is littered with rocks. Growing crops and earning a living from this land was no doubt a hard task during most of the region’s history.

In relation to these restrictive geographical conditions, accumulating archaeological records now make it possible to define “stable settlement areas” where habitation was widespread and common during much of the history of Palestine.⁷ This is in contrast to the “unstable settlement areas,” where towns, villages, and farmhouses were scarce during most periods.⁸ I will

⁶For a geographical summary on Palestine see Y. Karmon, *Israel: A Regional Geography* (London 1971) 5–33 [Hebrew].

⁷The Samaria region is a good example of a stable settlement area. This region, with relatively good soil and many water sources, was unaffected by the Jewish rebellions of the first and second centuries C.E. The settlements there continued to grow without interruption during the period in question: Y. Magen, “The Samaritans in the Roman-Byzantine Period,” in E. Stern and H. Eshel, edd., *The Samaritans* (Jerusalem 2002) 213–244 [Hebrew].

⁸For example, the Upper Galilee region: M. Aviam, “Large-Scale Production of Olive Oil in Galilee,” *Cathedra* 73 (1994) 26–35 [Hebrew]; or the Negev region: R. Rubin, “The Romanization of the Negev, Israel: Geographical and Cultural Changes in the Desert Frontier in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 23 (1997) 267–283.

focus here on the unstable settlement areas, where habitation was rare before and after Late Antiquity. These “frontier” areas, some in the remote periphery of Palestine, others near core settlement areas, underwent during Late Antiquity an impressive settlement growth as villagers increasingly confronted and overcame the restraining physical factors of these regions.

Archaeological surveys and excavations in Late Antique Palestine

Major progress has occurred in the archaeological study of the Late Antique period in the Roman East in general and in the modern state of Israel in particular. The construction boom during the last decades has brought in its wake comprehensive surveys in many parts of the country and many ancient sites have been excavated. Although the quality of the information imparted in the surveys is not uniform,⁹ there is nevertheless great value in utilizing this vast material to determine the volume and amplification of settlement in Late Antique Palestine.

An intense and systematic archeological survey has been underway in Israel for over thirty years, whose results confirm the picture obtained from the archaeological excavations. Over twenty-five maps have thus far been published in the *Archaeological Survey of Israel*, each outlining a stretch of land over 100 km² in size. Additional surveys have been conducted by uni-

⁹The skills of the surveyors have grown remarkably in recent years, but some problems remain, which may stem from the archeologists' inability to determine fairly precise dates from pottery or may be due to the nature of the modern land-use in a given area. In the early stages of the archeological survey, the surveyors tended to treat the Roman through the Byzantine Periods (first-seventh centuries C.E.) as a single block. Today most surveyors will differentiate between the Roman (63 B.C.-324 C.E.) and Byzantine (324-641) periods, and may even observe subdivisions between early and late Roman (63 B.C.-70 C.E.; 70-324), and early and late Byzantine Periods (324-491; 491-641). See S. T. Parker, “The Byzantine Period: An Empire's New Holy Land,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 62 (1999) 139, and I. Finkelstein, “Method of Field Survey and Data Recording,” in Finkelstein and Z. Lenderman, ed., *Highlands of Many Cultures: The Southern Samaria Survey I* (Tel Aviv 1997) 11-24.

versities and other research institutions.¹⁰ Survey information about more than 6,000 km²—more than a third of the estimated area of Late Antique Palestine—is in hand and can be used as an indication of the settlement process during Late Antiquity. Because the findings are so numerous, I cannot present the results of all the surveys but will cite some of the more salient examples from different parts of Palestine.

The north of the Golan Heights is characterized by the absence of permanent water sources and by its thick cover of basalt soil. Some 51 sites from the Early Roman Period (63 B.C.–70 C.E.) were surveyed in this region, as were 69 from the Late Roman Period (70–324) and 40 from the Byzantine Period (324–641).¹¹ The Hanita region in northwestern Galilee is studded with narrow ridges, small peaks, gorges, and basins. A total of 28 Hellenistic sites (332–63 B.C.), 41 Roman sites, and 45 Byzantine sites were surveyed within the boundaries of the map.¹² In the Mt Tabor map in southern Galilee, 10 Hellenistic, 30 Roman, and 49 Byzantine sites were surveyed.¹³ In the Nahalal map in Lower Galilee, 19 Hellenistic, 50 Late Roman, and 45 Byzantine sites were surveyed.¹⁴ The Mishmar Ha’Emek map includes both the fertile soils of the Jezreel Valley and the steep and not very hospitable slopes of the Menashe flats.

¹⁰For a summary of survey work up to the mid 1990’s, see R. Cohen, “Survey of Israel,” in E. M. Meyers, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* (New York 1997) 104–106; Y. Tsafir, “Some Notes on the Settlement and Demography of Palestine in the Byzantine Period: The Archaeological Evidence,” in J. D. Seger, ed., *Retrieving the Past: Essays on Archaeological Research and Methodology in Honor of G. W. van Beek* (Winona Lake 1996) 273–275.

¹¹M. Hartal, *Northern Golan Heights: The Archaeological Survey as a Source of Regional History* (Qazrin 1989) 130–131 [Hebrew].

¹²R. Frankel and N. Getzov, *Archaeological Survey of Israel: Map of Akhziv Map of Hanita* (Jerusalem 1997) 34*–36*.

¹³Z. Gal, *Archaeological Survey of Israel, Map of Gazit (46)* (Jerusalem 1991) 13*.

¹⁴A. Raban, *Archaeological Survey of Israel, Nahalal Map (28)* (Jerusalem 1982) vi–viii.

Within the boundaries of this map, 37 Hellenistic, 112 Late Roman, and 106 Byzantine sites were surveyed.¹⁵ In the Hadera map along the swampy coastal plain, 5 Hellenistic, 38 Early Roman, 75 Late Roman, and 64 Byzantine sites were surveyed,¹⁶ while in the Shechem syncline area 62 Early Roman, 75 Late Roman, and 133 Byzantine sites were surveyed.¹⁷ In the area of the Lod map, where limestone and dolomite rock surface has created a largely stony terrain, 19 Hellenistic, 45 Roman, and 106 Byzantine sites were surveyed.¹⁸ The Lachish survey map, part of the Judean lowlands, centered on 25 sites from the Hellenistic Period, as against 103 settlements from the Late Roman period and 158 Byzantine.¹⁹

The uniqueness of the Late Antique period is even more dramatically manifested along the periphery of Palestine, which is plagued by difficult environmental-climatic conditions. Thus, for example, on the northeastern slopes of the Menasseh hills, bordering the desert area of the Jordan Valley, 27 sites from the Hellenistic period were surveyed, versus 64 from the Roman/Late Roman Period and 137 from the Byzantine.²⁰ The Herodium survey map is situated to the west of the Judean Desert. The western ridge of the area marks the boundary between the settled, sown areas of the plateau and the pasturage region of the desert. Within the boundaries of the map only 1 Hellenistic

¹⁵ A. Raban, *Archaeological Survey of Israel: Map of Mishmar Ha-Emek (32)* (Jerusalem 1999) 21*-23*. The founding of the nearby city Legio, together with the strong Roman military presence, contributed to the development of the region.

¹⁶ Y. Neeman, S. Sender, E. Oren, *Archaeological Survey of Israel: Map of Mikhmoret (52) Map of Hadera (53)* (Jerusalem 2000) 11*-12*.

¹⁷ A. Zertal, *The Menasseh Hill Country Survey: The Shechem Syncline* (Haifa 1992) 59-63 [Hebrew].

¹⁸ R. Gophna and I. Beit-Arieh, *Archaeological Survey of Israel: Map of Lod (80)* (Jerusalem 1997) 12*.

¹⁹ Y. Dagan, *Archaeological Survey of Israel: Map of Lachish* (Jerusalem 1992) 18*.

²⁰ A. Zertal, *The Menasseh Hill Country Survey: The Eastern Valleys and the Fringes of the Desert* (Tel Aviv 1996) 88-93 [Hebrew].

site was surveyed, compared with 15 sites from the Late Roman Period and 46 Byzantine.²¹ The border of dry agriculture traverses also the center of the Urim survey map, to the south of the coastal plain. The survey indicates that up until the second century C.E. settlement was rather scant and most of it was connected to and dependent upon Roman military activity. During the Late Roman and Byzantine Periods the number of sites rose to 59 and 120, while well-developed water-collecting technologies were employed by the settlers. These enabled the farmers, for the first time in the history of the region, to distance themselves from Nahal Besor and build their settlements on the flats.²²

These archaeological surveys highlight primarily two phenomena: (1) A marked rise in settlement intensity during the second to fourth centuries, during which many settlements were established and continued to prosper during later stages of Late Antiquity; and (2) Spatial expansion of settlement and agricultural activity in most parts of Palestine, core and periphery, most of them sparsely settled before Late Antiquity.

While many scholars label the second to fourth centuries as one of the poorest periods in the history of Palestine,²³ a comparison of survey maps permits us to observe and ascertain with a reliable measure of confidence that the early parts of Late Antiquity were among the most prosperous periods in the history of Palestine. The Bar-Kokhva revolt was undoubtedly one of the most decisive events in the history of Palestine in

²¹Y. Hirschfeld, *Archaeological Survey of Israel: Map of Herodium (108/2)* (Jerusalem 1985) 10*.

²²D. Gazit, *Archaeological Survey of Israel, Map of Urim (125)* (Jerusalem 1996) 15*-17*.

²³M. Avi-Yonah, *The Jews under Roman and Byzantine Rule: A Political History of Palestine from the Bar-Kokhba War to the Arab Conquest* (London 1976) 89-136; D. Sperber, *Roman Palestine 200-400: The Land* (Jerusalem 1978), describes the third and fourth centuries as a series of continuous economic crises. See also P. Schäfer, *The History of the Jews in Antiquity* (Luxembourg 1995) 170-175.

general and of Judaea in particular.²⁴ Nevertheless, after a short period of recovery, an era of settlement expansion followed. Archaeological finds indicate that the fourth century's dramatic turn to Christianity²⁵ cannot be regarded as a turning point in the settlement history of Palestine.²⁶ In fact, as early as in the second century and even during the economic crisis that befell the Roman Empire during the third century,²⁷ Palestine saw one of its finest periods of prosperity both in the urban centers and in the rural areas. Many new settlements were established,²⁸ most of them farms, estates, and small villages.²⁹ Not only did

²⁴See several articles in A. Oppenheimer and U. Rappaport, ed., *The Bar-Kokhva Revolt: A New Approach* (Jerusalem 1984) [Hebrew].

²⁵E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire* (Oxford 1982); Z. Rubin, "Christianity in Byzantine Palestine," *The Jerusalem Cathedra* 3 (1983) 97–113; P. W. L. Walker, *Holy City Holy Places: Christian Attitudes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land* (Oxford 1990).

²⁶D. Bar, "Geographical Implications of Population and Settlement Growth in Late Antique Palestine," *Journal of Historical Geography* (forthcoming).

²⁷D. Bar, "Was There a 3rd-C. Economic Crisis in Palestine?" in J. H. Humphrey, ed., *The Roman and Byzantine Near East III* (*JRA* Suppl. 49 [2002]) 43–54.

²⁸Examples are: E. Stern and I. Bet Arie, "Excavations at Tel Kedesh (Tel abu Qudeis)," *Tel Aviv* 6 (1979) 9–12; V. Tzaferis and T. Shai, "Excavations at Kafr ar-Rameh," *Qadmoniot* 34–35 (1976) 83–85 [Hebrew]; J. Elgavish, *Shiqmona: On the Seacoast of Mount Carmel* (Tel Aviv 1994) 105–108 [Hebrew]; A. Siegelmann, "Soundings at H. Qastra, 1988," *'Atiqot* 29 (1996) 77–99.

²⁹Farm houses of varying sizes have been discovered in regions that were previously sparsely settled or not settled at all; general discussion in Y. Hirschfeld, "Farms and Villages in Byzantine Palestine," *DOP* 51 (1997) 67–70, about the fourth to seventh centuries. For the Hermon region: S. Dar, "Qalat Bustra—A Temple and Farm House from the Roman Period on Mount Hermon," *Eretz Israel* (Avraham Biran Volume) 23 (1992) 302–308 [Hebrew]; in the Carmel: S. Dar and Y. Ben-Ephraim, "Horvat Raqqit," *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 110 (1999) 26–28 [Hebrew]; S. Dar and A. Ziegelmann, "H. el-Kerak in the Carmel," in S. Dar and Z. Safrai, ed., *The Village in Ancient Israel* (Tel Aviv 1997) 187 [Hebrew]; in Samaria: I. Finkelstein, "The Land of Ephraim Survey 1980–1987: Preliminary Report," *Tel Aviv* 15–16 (1988–89) 159 table 14, where 84% of the sites were defined as "small" or "very small"; in western Samaria: Gophna/Beit-Arie (supra n.18) 11*; in Judaea: O. Sion, "Farms to the Northeast of Jerusalem," *'Atiqot* 32 (1992) 159–166 [Hebrew]; Hirschfeld (supra n.21) 11*–12*; in the Be'er Sheva basin: Y. Ustinova and P. Nahshoni, "Salvage Excavations in Ramot Nof, Be'er Sheva," *'Atiqot* 25 (1994) 157–177. In the Negev Highlands the phenomenon of farm houses was widespread: G. Avni, *Nomads, Farmers, and Town-Dwellers: Pastoralist-Sedentist Interaction in the Negev Highlands, Sixth-Eighth Centuries C.E.* (Jerusalem 1996) 8–11.

the number of settlements increase dramatically during that time, but many experienced expansion, with farms growing into villages, and villages into small towns.³⁰

It is true that the settlement momentum during that period was manifested also in Palestine's cities, with the urban sector growing enormously during Late Antiquity.³¹ Nevertheless, the more dramatic change took place in the rural areas, where hundreds of villages and farms were established. Palestine's Late Antique town and countryside show signs of a parallel expansion and prosperity, indicating co-existence and co-operation.

"Frontier" and periphery in Late Antique Palestine

Palestine's inhabitants used various methods to solve the problem of supplying food for the growing population. The recently discovered archaeological data allows us to distinguish between various levels of spatial changes which took place in Palestine during Late Antiquity and which are connected with this problem.

A decisive change is clearly visible in the stable settlement areas, where habitation and agriculture were common and widespread long before Late Antiquity. Research of the last few years indicates that during this period settlement was enormously expanded in those favored regions, while huge stretches of fallow land were converted into arable land and cash crops enabled the growing amounts of land to be used more profit-

³⁰Z. Yeivin, "On the 'Medium-sized City,'" *Eretz Israel* (Avi-Yonah volume) 19 (1987) 59–71 [Hebrew].

³¹A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*² (Oxford 1971) 269–281; Isaac (*supra* n.1) 333–371; J. J. Schwartz, "Archaeology and the City," in D. Sperber, *The City in Roman Palestine* (Oxford 1997) 149–187. Examples are Caesarea and Beit Shean-Scythopolis where the latest excavations demonstrate the centrality of the Late Antique period to their urban development. See G. Mazor and R. Bar-Nathan, "Scythopolis—Capital of Palaestina Secunda," *Qadmoniot* 107–108 (1994) 117–137 [Hebrew]; J. Patrich, "The Urban Context for the Acts of the Martyrs of Caesarea," *Cathedra* 107 (2003) 5–26 [Hebrew].

ably. Traditional extensive subsistence farming now developed into an intensive and more specialized agriculture. The Samaria region, to give an example, was a “stable settlement area” populated almost continuously before Late Antiquity. Nevertheless, the survey in this area reveals an impressive spread of advanced devices for processing agricultural produce and a doubling of the number of settled sites during Late Antiquity.³² While up until Late Antiquity many parts in these regions were used only as pasture and hunting grounds, they subsequently became an integral part of the tilled land.³³ Those “secondary” lands were developed mainly by terracing the mountain slopes, a process that obliged the farmers to invest enormous resources in removing stones and piling earth,³⁴ but was essential to the fast-growing population in the stable settlement areas. Palestine’s farmers employed methods similar to those used throughout the Mediterranean basin,³⁵ and the land’s natural landscape was dramatically altered, as the region experienced a population and cultivation increase not seen in any previous period of its history.

Yet the biggest and most dramatic change was in the unstable settlement areas that were not heavily settled prior to this period. Before Late Antiquity, farmers preferred not to settle those areas because they were either swampy or had poor soil quality. The demographic pressure in the stable settlement areas

³²S. Dar, *Landscape and Pattern: An Archaeological Survey of Samaria 800 B.C.E.–636 C.E.* (BAR Intern.Ser. 308 [1986]) 165–190; Finkelstein (*supra* n. 29) 156–161.

³³The Galilee and the Golan illustrate this phenomenon well. See Aviam (*supra* n.8) 26–35; H. Ben David, “Oil Presses and Oil Production in the Golan in the Mishnaic and Talmudic Periods,” *’Atiqot* 34 (1998) 1–62 [Hebrew].

³⁴*E.g.*, S. Gibson, B. Ibbs, A. Kloner, “The Sataf Project of Landscape Archaeology in the Judaeian Hills,” *Levant* 23 (1991) 37–41; G. Edelstein, I. Milevski, S. Aurant, *The Rephaim Valley Project: Villages, Terraces, and Stone Mounds* (Jerusalem 1998) 6–13.

³⁵L. Foxhall, “Feeling the Earth Move: Cultivation Techniques on Steep Slopes in Classical Antiquity,” in G. Shipley and J. Salmon, edd., *Human Landscapes in Classical Antiquity: Environment and Culture* (London 1996) 44–67.

drove some of the farmers, mostly small landholders, to use those marginal lands after combating the swamps, the poor soil, and the thick woods.

A marked increase in the number and density of settlements is evident in various enclaves that were not settled before the period in question, most of them to be found near stable settlement areas. These “frontier” zones include, for instance, Late Antiquity’s Hermon region, where, despite its height and the rough climatic conditions, the peasants skillfully devised advanced intensive farming methods and built dozens of farmhouses and small villages on the mountain slopes.³⁶ The Odem area in the north of the Golan, characterized by its difficult terrain and lack of permanent water sources, was not settled until the beginning of the third century, but owing to demographic pressure from neighboring areas, was occupied by settlers during Late Antiquity.³⁷ The drying of the Jezreel Valley swamps during this period resulted in the clearing of vast stretches of land near the central city of Scythopolis and the thickening of settlements in that area.³⁸ The Carmel region, likewise rocky, densely wooded, and lacking in permanent water sources, can also be regarded as a “frontier” zone. This area was first intensively settled only during the early stages of Late Antiquity. This was done after settlers cut down the natural vegetation, terraced the mountains, and quarried water cisterns.³⁹ The Sharon region near the

³⁶S. Dar, *Settlement and Cult Sites on Mount Hermon, Israel* (BAR Intern.Ser. 589 [1993]) 25–27.

³⁷Hartal (*supra* n.11) 130–133.

³⁸We do not have much evidence in Palestine for large-scale drainage projects done during Late Antiquity by the local authorities. B. Isaac and I. Roll, *Roman Roads in Judaea I The Legio-Scythopolis Road* (BAR Intern.Ser. 141 [1982]) 87–91, argue that the Jezreel Valley was drained by the Roman soldiers stationed in nearby Legio.

³⁹H.-P. Kuhnen, *Studien zur Chronologie und Siedlungsarchäologie des Karmel (Israel) zwischen Hellenismus und Spätantike* (Wiesbaden 1989) 331–336; S. Dar, *Sumaqa: A Roman and Byzantine Jewish Village on Mount Carmel, Israel* (BAR Intern.Ser. 815 [1999]).

city of Caesarea was marshy and covered with red soil unsuitable for convenient cultivation, and therefore inhabited heavily only after the second and third centuries, after deforestation and swamp drying.⁴⁰ A parallel phenomenon can be traced in the inner coastal plain region, where the difficult geographic conditions—mainly the lack of good land and water sources—kept the area sparsely populated before Late Antiquity, seeing an expansion of settlement only during the third and fourth centuries.⁴¹

This process, in various regions of Palestine, was individually motivated, not directed by the local authorities or by the rich landlords. Those showed a greater interest in the stable settlement areas where the more desirable and bigger plots of land had been cultivated for generations. The development of the “frontier” zones was the effort of small-scale farmers who occupied those minor and fallow lands,⁴² motivated by the growing demand for more settlement areas and food production.

Another dramatic and extraordinary process that occurred at the same time had to do with the settlement of the desert periphery of Palestine that had been sparsely settled for most of its history. The difficult geographic conditions that prevailed there limited human presence to nomads, soldiers, and merchants, with virtually no stable farming.⁴³ During Late Antiquity, how-

⁴⁰I. Roll and E. Ayalon, *Apollonia and Southern Sharon: Model of a Coastal City and its Hinterland* (Tel Aviv 1989) 141–183 [Hebrew], show how during Late Antiquity settlement encroached into the inner plains; on agriculture in this area see I. Roll and E. Ayalon, “Two Large Wine Presses in the Red Soil Regions of Israel,” *PEQ* 113 (1981) 111–125.

⁴¹Dagan (*supra* n.19) 18*.

⁴²This can be learned, for example, from the small-scale and Spartan farms of the settlers. See below on this.

⁴³R. Cohen, “Negev,” in Meyers (*supra* n.10) 120–122; M. Haiman, “The Early Bronze Age in the Western Negev Highlands,” *Eretz Israel* 21 (1991) 152–166 [Hebrew]. Exceptional were the few places where water sources were to be found, e.g. the Jericho oasis: J. Porat, “Aspects of the Development of Ancient Irrigation Agriculture in Jericho and Ein-Gedi,” in A. Kasher, A. Oppenheimer, U. Rappaport, edd., *Man and Land in Eretz-Israel in Antiquity* (Jerusalem 1986) 127–141 [Hebrew]; E. Netzer and G. Garbracht, “Water

ever, settlement encroached on those “frontier” areas as well,⁴⁴ pushing back the desert.

Over the past twenty years, an extensive archaeological survey has been conducted in the Negev, covering large parts of the region.⁴⁵ Although the grim southern part of this region has never been heavily settled, the northern and central districts present the remarkably unique image of substantial well-built Late Antique settlements, with many houses and impressive churches. The area contains seven major compact settlements as well as numerous hamlets or clusters of modest farmhouses and extensive stone walls and dikes that are taken as evidence for large-scale agriculture.⁴⁶ Despite the impressive historical and archaeological research of the past few decades, it is still under discussion whether this exceptional settlement phenomenon was the outcome of the massive immigration of newcomers, or just a cultural impact brought about by a comparatively small number of soldiers, priests, and administrators who acted as agents of innovation and change among the local population.⁴⁷ It is clear that the flourishing of the desert did not occur as an internal process of sedentarization,⁴⁸ limited to the Negev, but was part of a wider development, strongly influenced by the

Channels and a Royal Estate of the Late Hellenistic Period in Jericho's Western Plains,” in D. Amit, Y. Hirschfeld, J. Patrich, edd., *The Aqueducts of Israel* (*JRA* Suppl. 46 [2002]) 366–379.

⁴⁴P. Mayerson, *The Ancient Agricultural Regime of Nessana and the Central Negeb* (London 1960).

⁴⁵For a summary of the surveys see Hirschfeld (*supra* n.29) 50–60.

⁴⁶R. Rubin, *The Negev as a Settled Land: Urbanization and Settlement in the Desert in the Byzantine Period* (Jerusalem 1990) 128–162 [Hebrew], and Rubin (*supra* n.8). Farmhouses are usually found composed of five to ten dwelling units, the houses being simple rectangular structures.

⁴⁷R. Rubin, “Priests, Soldiers and Administrators: Society and Institutions in the Byzantine Negev,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 12 (1997) 56–74, and “Urbanization, Settlement and Agriculture in the Negev Desert—the Impact of the Roman-Byzantine Empire on the Frontier,” *ZDPV* 112 (1996) 49–60.

⁴⁸I. Finkelstein and A. Perevoletsky, “Processes of Sedentarization and Nomadization in the History of Sinai and the Negev,” *BASOR* 279 (1990) 67–88.

Roman-Byzantine empire, its interests, institutions, and, most important, its settlers.⁴⁹ This intruding settlement culture, with all of its characteristics, was opposed to the less developed desert nomadic tradition that had characterized the region for centuries. Its influence was prominent both in the material culture, agriculture, and architecture, for example, and in the extent to which the Christian faith and the Greek language were adopted.⁵⁰ At least part of this exceptional settlement activity was the outcome of immigration from other parts of Palestine,⁵¹ a phenomenon that can be traced in other desert or semi-arid areas in the eastern parts of Palestine as well.⁵²

Despite the widely held view that this settlement growth was unique and should be attributed to the holiness of the Palestine,⁵³ the same can be said for other parts of the Roman world during Late Antiquity. Very similar historical-geographical phenomena, though on a different chronology than in Palestine, can be observed in other parts of the Roman world—

⁴⁹See R. Rubin, "The Roman-Byzantine Empire and its Desert Frontiers: The Negev vs Tripolitania—a Comparative Study," *Cathedra* 89 (1998) 63–82 [Hebrew], for comparison to a similar process in North Africa. Cf. D. J. Mattingly, "Africa: A Landscape of Opportunity?" in Mattingly, ed., *Dialogues in Roman Imperialism* (JRA Suppl. 23 [1997]) 117–139.

⁵⁰R. Rubin and Y. Schershewsky, "Sa'adon—an Urban Settlement of the Byzantine Period in the Negev," *Qadmoniot* 81–82 (1988) 45–54 [Hebrew]; Y. Tsafir, *Excavations at Rehovot in the Negev I The Northern Church* (Qedem 25 [1988]).

⁵¹Monks were among the most prominent groups of settlers in the desert area of Palestine. Nevertheless, it seems that most of them, at least during the initial phases of this period, were not natives of Palestine. See Y. Hirschfeld, *The Judaean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period* (New Haven 1992) 239–249, for a biography of the major figures of Judaean Desert monasticism.

⁵²Research in the deserts of Samaria and Judaea, for example, demonstrates how, despite the dearth of rain, settlements thrived and agriculture prospered. See Zertal (*supra* n.20) 88–93; A. Feldstein *et al.*, "Southern Part of Maps of Ramalla and el-Bireh and Northern Part of the Map of 'Ein Kerem," in I. Finkelstein and Y. Magen, edd., *Archaeological Survey of the Hill Country of Benjamin* (Jerusalem 1993) 138–139 [Hebrew]; Hirschfeld (*supra* n.21) 11*–12*.

⁵³See for example M. Avi-Yonah, "The Economics of Byzantine Palestine," *IEJ* 8 (1958) 39–51, which is still widely cited.

for example North Africa, Egypt, Syria and Jordan⁵⁴—regions of the Roman Empire that had no holy status. In the last decades an enormous number of field surveys have been generated all around the Mediterranean, and the most notable aspect of the history of the countryside in these regions is the considerable extension of the area occupied by sedentary people. Population growth, development of villages and hamlets, and increased levels of cultivation and irrigation have been noted there. Palestine, together with many other provinces of the Roman Empire, constituted part of a vast economic system that brought population and settlement to a climax. This is manifested in the high settlement density, large populations, and ratio of cultivated to arid areas.

Settlements in the “frontier” zones of Palestine:

A sociological perspective

The archaeological finds that have been gathered in Palestine’s countryside may enable a better understanding of the social and economic process related to the expansion of the population into the “frontier” zones. During this period, so it appears, “frontier” zones played a central role in the molding of the local society, composed of several religious groups.⁵⁵

During Late Antiquity, emigration for long and even intermediate distances was relatively rare.⁵⁶ For this reason we may

⁵⁴For North Africa, see P. Ørsted and L. Ladjimi Sebaï, “Town and Countryside in Roman Tunisia,” *JRA* 5 (1992) 69–96; M. Grahame, “Rome without Romanization: Cultural Change in the Pre-Desert of Tripolitania (First-Third Centuries A.D.),” *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 17 (1998) 93–111; Egypt: R. S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1993) 110–147; North Syria: G. Tate, *Le campagnes de la Syrie du nord* (Paris 1992), and “The Syrian Countryside during the Roman Era,” in S. E. Alcock, ed., *The Early Roman Empire in the East* (Exeter 1997) 55–71; Jordan: P. Freeman, “Roman Jordan,” in B. Macdonald, R. Adams, P. Bienkowski, edd., *The Archaeology of Jordan* (Sheffield 2001) 443–445.

⁵⁵On the religious diversity in Palestine see J. E. Taylor, *Christians and Holy Places: The Myth of Jewish-Christian Origins* (Oxford 1993) 48–85.

⁵⁶R. S. Bagnall and B. W. Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge 1994) 160–169. See I. Hershkovitz *et al.*, “Byzantine Population of Tel Mahrad (Feiran Oasis): Indigenous or External?” in G. Gvirtzman *et al.*, edd., *Sinai* (Tel

assume that most of the inhabitants of the inner “frontier” zones of Palestine such as the Sharon region as well as the exterior zones such as the Negev originated from areas nearby. Spatially, the movement towards the “frontier” was not directed and programmed but spread in every direction where an opportunity arose—in the north of Palestine, to the south, and in the center. The “frontier” was simultaneously on the periphery of Palestine (in the northeastern parts of the Samaria Mountains, for example)⁵⁷ and also in the inner coastal planes (near major cities like Caesarea and Eleutheropolis and regions that had been settled for generations before Late Antiquity).⁵⁸ It was the individual, the Palestinian farmer, who chose his way, free from any governmental intervention, and motivated mostly by the unobtainability of cultivated land in the stable settlement areas. Those “frontier” zones—Western Galilee, the highlands of the Negev, or Southern Sharon—were open for settlement given the political and military stability that characterized Late Antique Palestine.

All through Late Antiquity, a multitude of settlers were on the move seeking alternative settlement sites in the “frontier” zones. The fact that the stable and desirable settlement areas, where good soil was to be found, had been occupied for generations, some of them by rich landowners,⁵⁹ forced the settlers to confront the marginal “frontier” zones. In this “marginal” society, socially and geographically, survival was the main goal, and therefore experimentation, resourcefulness, improvization, and industriousness also became widespread.

Aviv 1987) 687–694 [Hebrew], for research on the southern Sinai’s local and monastic population.

⁵⁷Zertal (*supra* n.20).

⁵⁸Roll/Ayalon 1989 (*supra* n.40).

⁵⁹See Z. Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* (London/New York 1994) 82–99; Y. Hirschfeld, “Jewish Rural Settlement in Judaea in the Early Roman Period,” in Alcock (*supra* n.54) 74–80, for examples of estates occupied by landlords. Nevertheless, it is extremely difficult to find in Palestine traces of the concentration of enormous wealth and power in the hands of the aristocratic few, so characteristic of other provinces of the empire.

In antiquity land was the main component in food production and was regarded simultaneously as property and a means of production.⁶⁰ For this reason, the struggle for the land was one of the most critical issues in the history of Palestine.⁶¹ In the stratified society of Late Antique Palestine the probability of altering an individual's political, social, and economic status was slight.⁶² People usually were born, lived, and were buried in the same geography and in the same social and economic stratum; mobility was very limited. All this notwithstanding, the vacant hinterland that was potentially under the farmer's control, the hunch and the experience that land could be found, facilitated some sense of social mobility and the possibility of becoming a landowner.

Despite several clues about land re-organization during the reign of Diocletian,⁶³ we do not possess direct information on a

⁶⁰P. Garnsey and R. Saller, *The Roman Empire. Economy, Society and Culture* (Berkeley 1987) 44; J. Pastor, *Land and Economy in Ancient Palestine* (London 1997) 1–3.

⁶¹S. Applebaum, "The Struggle for the Soil, and the Revolt of 66–73 C.E.," *Eretz Israel* 10 (1971) 274–282 [Hebrew], and "Economic Life in Palestine," in S. Safrai *et al.*, edd., *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Assen 1976) 692–699; U. Rappaport, "The Land Issue as a Factor in Inter-Ethnic Relations in Eretz-Israel during the Second Temple Period," and R. Jankelewitz, "The Gentiles' Struggle for Land Ownership in Eretz-Israel," in Kasher/Oppenheimer/Rappaport (*supra* n.43) 80–86 and 117–123 [Hebrew]; Schäfer (*supra* n.23) 121–130.

⁶²For the general picture in the Roman Empire, see Garnsey/Saller (*supra* n.60) 107–125; A. Marcone, "Late Roman Social Relations," *CAH²* XIII (1998) 338–370. For Palestine: M. Goodman, *State and Society in Roman Galilee, A.D. 132–212* (Totowa 1982) 31–40; M. Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome, AD 66–70* (Cambridge 1987); G. H. Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine, First Three Centuries C.E.* (Berkeley 1990); Pastor (*supra* n.60) 145–150.

⁶³It seems that the Diocletianic administrative and military reorganization of the provinces had a measurable impact on the settlement in Palestine; see E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian* (Leiden 1976) 533–538. Some fiscal measures were taken during this period, as attested by boundary-stones related to a number of villages in the Hula Valley, the northwestern part of Galilee: Y. Aharoni, "Three New Boundary-Stones from the Western Golan," *'Atiqot* 1 (1955) 109–114, and "Two Additional Boundary Stones from the Hula Valley," *'Atiqot* 2 (1959) 152–154. This marshy frontier area underwent land improvement during the period in question. See lately also D. Siyon and M. Hartal, "A New Tetrarchic Boundary-Stone," *SCI* 23 (2003) 233–239.

Roman or Byzantine ruling or any other agent that directed the settlement of the “frontier” zones.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, in clearing lands and expanding the cultivated areas, the farmer—who thus gave himself the opportunity to cultivate agricultural areas to which nobody had previously claimed ownership—and the central regime—which could thus collect more taxes from the farmers—shared a common interest. Roman legislation allowed peasants to occupy uncultivated land and to become its owners once they had developed it and paid the necessary tax.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the legal conditions under which land was appropriated in the “frontier” areas of Palestine are unknown.

The Palestinian “frontier,” with all its geographical limitations, can be seen as a place where many of the lower-class residents of Palestine were granted an economic opportunity that was far better than in their previous settlements. In this respect, the “frontier” served as an economic and social safety valve which may have prevented political and social radicalization. Some scholars believe that land struggle was one of the main reasons for the outbreak of the Jewish uprisings.⁶⁶ In contrast to this unstable period, the decades following the suppression of the Bar-Kokhva revolt in 135 C.E. up until the end of the fifth century, when the Samaritan revolt spread,⁶⁷

⁶⁴The Roman road system may have had some influence on the frontier settlement movement. See I. Roll, “The Roman Road System in Judaea,” *The Jerusalem Cathedra* 3 (1983) 136–181. The Odem region, to the north of the Golan Heights, was not settled before the second and third centuries because of its geographical characteristics. As a result of demographic pressures, aided by the paving of the Roman road from Caesarea Philippi to Damascus, settlers established a few villages there: Hartal (*supra* n.11) 130–131.

⁶⁵Many passages in Roman legislation concern taxation of waste land. On this see C. R. Whittaker, “Agri Deserti,” in M. I. Finley, ed., *Studies in Roman Property* (Cambridge 1976) 137–165, and “Rural Life in the Later Roman Empire,” *CAH*² XIII (1998) 281–285. Although *agri deserti* is usually described as marginal abandoned land, I hope to argue in the future that in part these rulings addressed never-cultivated land that was claimed by the new settlers.

⁶⁶*Supra* n.61.

⁶⁷For Samaritan population expansion into bordering and vacant areas such as the coastal plain, the Carmel, and the Bet-Shean Valley, see Y. Magen, “The

were characterized by a relative calm and absence of major military conflicts. The mere fact that Palestine's expanding population were allowed to settle the "frontier" zones may possibly have been one of the reasons why no other rebellion was then staged against Roman and Byzantine rule.

The inclination towards "frontier" settlement usually characterizes periods of political and military stability,⁶⁸ and Late Antiquity was indeed a unique and unparalleled period of stability in the history of Palestine. In fact, all those who were satisfied and pleased, the cautious, and scared, did not head for the "frontier," and remained in their secure settlement areas. Nevertheless, under the relatively stable economic conditions of Palestine in that era and because of the impressive population growth, at least some of the local farmers were inclined to forego the competition against their neighbors and preferred to migrate to the nearby "frontier" zones. In those areas, after a prolonged process of land reclamation, agriculture could be sustained.

Since those "frontier" zones were settled in a rather selective process, the societies that developed there were not necessarily identical to the ones from which the immigrants came. The settlers' desire was, presumably, to be assembled in accordance with their ethnic and religious affiliation. In those remote "frontier" areas and in the isolation of the new settlements, shared characteristics were even more dominant. This phenomenon can be demonstrated in the Ramot Yissakhar region, an area scarcely populated before Late Antiquity but largely in-

Areas of Samaritan Settlement in the Roman-Byzantine Period," in E. Stern and H. Eshel, edd., *The Samaritans* (Jerusalem 2002) 245–271 [Hebrew]. It seems that land shortage was one of the main reasons for the outbreak of the Samaritan revolt in 529: Procop. *Anec.* 11.29–30, cf. L. Di Segni, "Samaritan Revolts in Byzantine Palestine," in Stern/Eshel 454–480 [Hebrew].

⁶⁸For a parallel in late nineteenth century Arab society, see D. Grossman, *Expansion and Desertion, the Arab Village and Offshoots in Ottoman Palestine* (Tel-Aviv 1994) [Hebrew].

habited by Jews during this period. In contrast to the neighboring areas of the Jezreel and Bet-Shean Valleys, with their ample supply of water sources and good soil, the Ramot Yissakhar region is characterized by intermittent water sources and basalt soil.⁶⁹ Yet despite these limitations, a Jewish population penetrated this region during the early phases of Late Antiquity. Although historical sources dealing with this area during the Roman period are scant, elements from ancient synagogues found at several sites attest to an extensive Jewish presence.⁷⁰ Similarly, the Western Galilee region, also characterized by difficult geographical conditions, was inhabited by Christians during later parts of Late Antiquity,⁷¹ as attested in the dozens of churches surveyed in this region.⁷²

“Frontier” zones were also regions where the Roman-Hellenistic-Mediterranean culture and the local native culture interacted. When settlers moved into “frontier” zones of Palestine partly inhabited by nomads,⁷³ they not only settled those areas but also enormously influenced the local geography and society. During the settlement process, they introduced various technological innovations which had not previously

⁶⁹Gal (*supra* n.13) 13*; his *Archaeological Survey of Israel, Map of Har Tavor (41) Map of 'En Dor* (Jerusalem 1998) 15*, and *Ramat Yi'sakhar: hityashvut kedumah be-ezot Shulayim* (Tel Aviv 1980) [Hebrew].

⁷⁰Z. Gal, “Ancient Synagogues in the Eastern Lower Galilee,” in D. Urman and P. V. M. Flesher, ed., *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery* (Leiden 1995) 157–165; A. Onn, “The Ancient Synagogue at Kafr Misr,” *'Atiqot* 25 (1994) 117–134.

⁷¹Frankel/Getzov (*supra* n.12) 34*–36*; R. Frankel *et al.*, *Settlement Dynamics and Regional Diversity in Ancient Upper Galilee: Archaeological Survey of Upper Galilee* (IAA Reports 14 [Jerusalem 2001]) 110–116.

⁷²M. Aviam, “Christian Galilee in the Byzantine Period,” in E. M. Meyers, ed., *Galilee through the Centuries: Confluence of Cultures* (Winona Lake 1999) 281–300.

⁷³See for example the successful attempts of many early members of the Christian clergy to convert the members of the nomadic tribes on the fringes of Palestine. Z. Rubin, “The Conversion of Mavias, the Saracen Queen,” *Cathedra* 47 (1988) 25–49 [Hebrew]; Y. Hirschfeld, “Euthymius and His Monastery in the Judean Desert,” *Liber Annus* 43 (1993) 343.

existed in those areas.⁷⁴ One can mention various agricultural devices characteristic of Mediterranean culture, which were now infused into these “frontier” regions,⁷⁵ as well as aspects of burial customs,⁷⁶ architecture, and religion.⁷⁷ Water installations, the knowledge of how to plaster cisterns, and the capability to collect and transport water were also central.⁷⁸

We do not have literary sources describing the actual process of immigration to the “frontier” areas.⁷⁹ Nevertheless we can assume that they were inhabited gradually and not as a one-time act. We can corroborate this with surveys and excavations conducted in the western periphery of the Samaria and Judaea

⁷⁴See for example how settlers in northern Samaria became skilled in planting grapes in rocky surfaces: A. Zertal, “Hewn Vineyard—Unknown Method from the Roman-Byzantine Period in Samaria,” in Y. Eshel, ed., *Judaea and Samaria Research Studies: Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Meeting 1998* (Tel Aviv 1999) 33–43 [Hebrew].

⁷⁵In the Golan: Ben David (*supra* n.33) 1–66; in Galilee: R. Frankel, “Some Oil Presses from Western Galilee,” *BASOR* 286 (1992) 49–59; Aviam (*supra* n. 8); in the coastal region: Roll/Ayalon 1981 (*supra* n.40); in the Negev: G. Mazor, “The Wine Presses of the Negev,” *Qadmoniot* 53–54 (1981) 51–60 [Hebrew]; P. Mayerson, “The Wine and Vineyards of Gaza in the Byzantine Period,” *BASOR* 257 (1985) 75–80.

⁷⁶Z. Lederman and M. Aviam, “Rock-Cut Tombs from the Byzantine Period in the Tefen Region,” *Atiqot* 33 (1997) 137–149, describe the settlement process in western Galilee, which can be studied from the burial customs of the locals.

⁷⁷See for example the expansion of Christian architecture into western Galilee during the fifth and sixth centuries: M. Aviam, “Horvath Hesheq—a Unique Church in Upper Galilee: Preliminary Report,” in G. C. Bottini, L. Di Segni, C. Corbo, edd., *Christian Archaeology in the Holy Land: New Discoveries* (Jerusalem 1990) 351–378. Or the Roman influence on the Negev settlements: e.g., A. Negev, *The Architecture of Oboda: Final Report* (*Qedem* 36 [1997]), and his “The Churches in the Central Negev: An Archeological Survey,” *RBibl* 81 (1974) 400–422.

⁷⁸A. Kloner, “Dams and Reservoirs in the North-Eastern Mountains of the Negev,” *Eretz Israel* (I. Dunayevsky volume) 11 (1973) 248–257 [Hebrew]; R. Rubin, “Water Conservation Methods in Israel’s Negev Desert in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 14 (1988) 229–244; Y. Hirschfeld, “The Water Supply System of the Monastery of Chariton,” in Amit/Hirschfeld/Patrich (*supra* n.43) 428–437.

⁷⁹See the much later Nessana material, which offers much of a general interest and provides a wealth of information on the social, cultural, and economic history of Negev society: P. Mayerson, *Monks, Martyrs, Soldiers and Saracens: Papers on the Near East in Late Antiquity (1962–1993)* (Jerusalem 1994).

Deserts⁸⁰ and also in the southern parts of Palestine. During the late third century, settlement in the southern parts of the Judaeian highlands had started to overflow beyond the aridity line towards the Be'ersheva basin,⁸¹ which was settled gradually.⁸² It was during the later parts of Late Antiquity, when settlement was broadening southward, that the "cities" of the Negev were growing and hundreds of farmhouses were built amongst them. It can be assumed that during the initial phases of settlement, it was mainly individuals who penetrated the "frontier" and that only later, when these pioneers had paved the way for the small-scale farmers who followed them, more settlers started to immigrate to the same areas. Those settlers came with their families and built small farmhouses⁸³ while cultivating the land with rather limited resources. Only later, after quite a long consolidation process, were more sophisticated cultivation methods and devices and cultural influences introduced into the "frontier" zones, enabling settlement on a broader scale. The rustic and simple format of the houses of the "frontier" zones suited a society made up of pioneer peasants who had cleared stones from the fields and who practiced, in most cases, an agriculture poor in food crops, which did not permit them to accumulate any significant surplus. Among

⁸⁰Feldstein *et al.* (*supra* n.52) 138–139 survey the rise of semi-desert settlements from Roman to Byzantine periods. See also Hirschfeld (*supra* n.21) 10*.

⁸¹A. Ofer, "Judean Hills Survey," in E. Stern, ed., *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem 1993) 815–816.

⁸²The late third and fourth centuries were a prosperous time in the Be'ersheva basin. Settlement may have been renewed owing to the initiative of Diocletian: Smallwood (*supra* n.63) 533–538. See also P. Figueras, "Beersheva in the Roman-Byzantine Period," *Boletín de la Asociación Española de Orientalistas* 16 (1980) 135–162, for the status of Be'ersheva during the late Roman and Early Byzantine periods. The settlement revival in this area is attested in various excavations and surveys. See for example sites surveyed by Y. Guvrin, *Archaeological Survey of Israel: Map of Nahal Yattir (139)* (Jerusalem 1991); remains of a farmhouse: G. Tahal, "Kh. 'Amra (west)," *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 16 (1997) 132; N. Negev, "Nahal Hevron—Dams," *ibid.* 128–131; A. Bar'el, "Horvat Ma'aravim," *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 114 (2002) 98*–99*.

⁸³See for example Guvrin (*supra* n.82) sites no. 78, 100, 184, and others.

them, however, were richer peasants, who sometimes built villas.⁸⁴

Summary

Far-reaching changes took place in Palestine's population during Late Antiquity. One of the most dramatic was the remarkable growth of population. The settlement change that occurred during Late Antiquity had to do with the comfortable conditions brought about by the Roman rulers: an absence of military tension that extended over a long period, as well as the presence of a commercial network on a huge scale within the Roman Empire. In contrast to other eras in the history of Palestine, the inhabitants of the country—pagans, Christians, Jews, and Samaritans—enjoyed then a long period of relief, lived in relative security, and benefited from the fruits of the *pax Romana*.

Up until Late Antiquity, major parts of Palestine were composed of various geographical enclaves that the local population preferred not to settle but to encircle. Only nomads settled in other regions, on the desert periphery. The absence of wars, plagues, and major earthquakes enabled population growth and shifted the overflow from the stable settlement areas towards the “frontier” zones, secondary in their geographical and economic quality. These zones have had an important and central place in the social history of Palestine for their economic and social significance.

The local inhabitants took advantage of the environment provided by Roman rule to dedicate their time to nurturing their agriculture, their settlements, and their economic situation and thus to enjoy the fruits of prosperity. This calm allowed settlers to sever their ties with the introverted settlements located in the

⁸⁴For example, an impressive manor house that has been excavated in the Judaeian lowlands: S. Gudovitch, Y. Mintzker, G. Avni, “Horvat Hazan,” *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 4 (1986) 46–48.

stable settlement regions and move to the open and more remote countryside, the “frontier,” thereby responding successfully to the growing demand for cultivated land in the older and more established settlements.

The cultural change in the “frontier” areas of Palestine can be described as unconscious and self-evolving. No single individual, or group, was responsible for the direction of the movement towards the periphery. It was the unintended outcome of the actions of a large number of individuals—both enterprising pioneers and small-scale farmers who were pressed out of living in settled areas. Rome did not create the “frontier,” encourage its occupation, or attempt to guide its development. The dynamics for change came almost exclusively from the indigenous Palestinian population. All that Rome did was provide the political context within which the transformation could take place. It seems that the conclusions originating from Palestine’s countryside may be exported to other regions of the Roman Empire; there too “frontier” areas were conquered as a result of an effort made by small-scale settlers. In Palestine, however, the discovery of dwellings in remote, previously unsettled areas is one of the most impressive aspects of social life during Late Antiquity. This development expresses a shift of the geographical as well as cultural center of gravity from the city to the rural areas in the inner and outer periphery of this land.⁸⁵

September, 2003

Department of Geography
The Hebrew University
Jerusalem 91905, Israel
dorbar@mscc.huji.ac.il

⁸⁵I am most grateful to K. G. Holum, I. Shatzman, and H. Sivan for their invaluable counsel during my writing of this paper.